



**Maria das Neves de Sousa.** *São Tomé e Príncipe como um Gateway Regional: Estratégia para um desenvolvimento sustentável.* Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas (ISCSP), 2020. 324 pp. EUR 18.33, paper, ISBN 978-989-646-142-3.

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**Published on** H-Luso-Africa (March, 2021)

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This book is based upon Maria das Neves de Sousa's homonymous PhD thesis in social sciences in the area of socioeconomic development, which she defended at the Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas (ISCSP) in Lisbon in 2017. The author is a Santomean economist with a long and impressive professional and political career in her country. She served as São Tomé and Príncipe (STP)'s first female prime minister (2002-04) and ran twice for the presidency, in 2011 and 2016, albeit without success. A prominent member of the Liberation Movement of São Tomé and Príncipe/Social Democratic Party (MLSTP/PSD), the party that ruled the country for most of the time since independence in 1975, she is likely to run for the third time in the 2021 presidential elections. This personal background makes her book all the more interesting.

Neves claims that STP, Africa's second smallest country with a surface area of 1,001 km and just over 200,000 inhabitants, has the geostrategic potential to become a regional gateway for the entire, oil-rich Gulf of Guinea region, which in turn would facilitate the country's sustainable development. Neves's argument and analysis are guided by a multidisciplinary approach using qualitative and quantitative methods and theories from dif-

ferent schools of economic thought, including international relations and political science together with developmental concepts and statistical information stemming from international financial institutions and development agencies. The extensive bibliography includes a disproportionate number of publications authored by professors teaching at the institution where she obtained her doctorate degree. This is possibly the result of institutional practice, rather than based upon substantive scholarly considerations. However, the author's use of a significant body of information originating from academic publications and reports produced by other Santomean authors is praiseworthy. The book is well written in an accessible style and the arguments put forward are presented in an adequate manner in the book's three parts subdivided into thirteen chapters. The three parts deal with socioeconomic development theories, STP's socioeconomic realities, and STP's potential as a regional gateway, respectively.

Neves's analysis places STP in the context of small island developing states (SIDS) that share several structural vulnerabilities such as a small population and market, an oversized state, a lack of qualified human resources, high international transport costs, little economic diversification, a

reduced export base, and great dependence on imports. The problems of small island states were first studied within the British Commonwealth in the 1960s, and since the 1990s the UN has given special attention to this category. The other African SIDS, that is, Cabo Verde, the Comoros, Mauritius, and the Seychelles are thus well suited for a comparative analysis of socioeconomic data. According to Neves, in the case of STP the common problems affecting SIDS are aggravated by a reduced administrative management capability due to weak institutional capacities, the poor use of available resources, and the inadequate qualification of human resources associated with the brain drain. Another aggravating factor she mentions is the lack of a global development strategy associated with a deficient use of external aid in the creation and modernization of infrastructure and the technical incapacity to create a private investment-friendly climate.

In order to carry out a preliminary assessment of STP's potential to become a regional gateway and the obstacles it faces, she interviewed eleven local politicians, businesspersons, and representatives of international organizations. Apparently, none of the interviewees questioned the feasibility of STP acting as regional gateway as such. Subsequently she applied a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threat) template to analyze the answers. The author concludes that STP's principal strengths are the archipelago's location off the African coast in a privileged, geostrategic position in the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea; a functioning multiparty democracy; political stability and social peace in a society free of ethnic, religious, or linguistic cleavages; and the economic potential for expanding the service sector, maritime economy, tourism, hydrocarbons, and tropical export agriculture. The country's principal weaknesses would be the costs of insularity, the lack of economies of scale, insufficient infrastructures, food import dependency, poor institutional capacities, a lack of qualified human resources, and a very limited offer of leisure services. In

terms of opportunities, the author reiterates the islands' geostrategic position associated with political stability and social peace and the increasing international demand for attractive tourist destinations. As regards possible threats, she lists sea piracy, the emergence of competing gateway projects in the region, government corruption, environmental pressures, and the volatility of international tourism.

Neves borrowed the concept of gateway from the geopolitical theory of the American geographer Saul Bernard Cohen, who defines it as a geopolitical structure that links different parts of the world by facilitating the exchange of peoples, goods, and ideas.[1] According to Neves, examples of existing gateways are Singapore, Hong-Kong, Finland, Bahrain, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Bahamas. A somewhat similar idea is that of a logistical platform, conceived in France in the 1960s to concentrate and optimize good distribution in urban centers. Logistical platforms are geographic spaces where a large number of operations are concentrated so as to increase productivity and competitiveness by improving the flow of goods and services. An example studied by the author is the Multimodal Logistics Platform in Anápolis, Goiás, Brazil. The concept of a regional service platform has been presented as the country's future regional economic role by consecutive STP governments since the late 1990s when the country signed its first oil and gas exploration contract with a foreign company. Neves argues that due to its favorable geostrategic position and sociopolitical features, STP has competitive advantages to play the role of regional gateway in a sub-region dominated by oil-producing countries, particularly with regard to the eleven-member Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS/CEEAC), comprising a total population of 118 million with a per capita GDP of \$4,870 (2015). Neves believes that the target region would be significantly larger, stretching from Lomé (Togo) to Lobito (Angola), if one considers the twelve Gulf of Guinea countries whose major coastal cities are

within range of a two-hour flight or forty-eight-hour sea voyage from São Tomé. These countries have a total population of 388.3 million people and a GDP of \$765.6 billion, boasting an annual GDP growth of 5.4 percent (2015).

Neves places great trust in STP's multiparty democracy, which was instituted in 1990 as a facilitating element in the country's transformation into a regional gateway, provided that there is a political consensus between the legislative and executive powers in the definition of political strategies and the adoption of the necessary legislation. She recognizes that political instability marked by frequent changes of government, as the country experienced between 1991 and 2014, forms an impediment to any transformative development process. In economic terms, she considers tourism, free-trade zones, and the ocean economy, including off-shore oil production, as strategic vectors for the country becoming a regional gateway. She admits that so far tourism's development has been slow, while the establishment of free-trade zones failed completely. The first tourism development plan adopted in 2001 projected an increase to 25,000 tourist arrivals in 2010; however, this figure was only reached in 2016.

Attempts by foreign companies to set up free-trade zones failed in 1999 in Príncipe and in 2008 in São Tomé, due to a lack of interested investors. In 2008, the government and a French shipping company signed a contract for the construction of a deep-sea container trans-shipment port in São Tomé. Since then, consecutive governments have failed to obtain foreign funding for the ambitious \$500-million harbor project. Neves emphasizes that the extension and modernization of existing transport, energy, and telecom infrastructures, as well as the existence of an attractive tax system, an efficient administration, and a credible and independent judiciary, are similarly indispensable for the archipelago's transformation into a regional gateway. She firmly believes that despite the failures of consecutive development models after

independence in STP, the said concept is a feasible alternative strategy for sustainable development.

However, the author unfortunately does not provide an adequate answer to the crucial question of who will be prepared to fund the many crucial investments in an impoverished former plantation economy with an annual budget of only \$175 million, half of whose funding relies upon external donors. In the case of public investments, foreign donors provide even 98 percent of the necessary funding. Another shortcoming of the book is that statistical data such as GDP, Human Development Index, incidence of malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other health data as well as information on education and tourism is largely outdated, because the figures presented in her doctoral thesis were not updated for its publication in book form. Some of São Tomé's historical data quoted in the book is erroneous, as for example the period of Dutch presence in the seventeenth century, the abolition of the slave trade, the introduction of coffee and cocoa in the islands (pp. 123-124), and the year when São Tomé was granted city rights (p. 218). Apparently, the author relied upon inaccurate secondary sources for the small colonial history section.

More serious in the context of the book's main argument is the false claim that in 2006, after having drilled exploration wells, Chevron announced the discovery of oil in Block 1 of the Joint Development Zone (JDZ) shared with Nigeria (p. 188). In fact, Chevron failed to discover commercially viable oil deposits at the time, which prompted the company's exit from the JDZ. Worse still, until 2012, several other oil companies, including Sinopec and Total, conducted additional exploratory drillings for oil in the JDZ without discovering exploitable reserves, consequently abandoning the JDZ altogether. As yet there is no certainty regarding the presence of exploitable oil reserves in the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) since exploratory drillings in this area have so far not been carried out. Unfortunately, the author fails to

mention these adversities in her book at all, although the availability of future oil revenue is crucial for the country's prospects of becoming a regional gateway.

Regardless of these shortcomings and inaccuracies, Neves's book is certainly an interesting contribution to the debates among scholars and policymakers on the sustainable socioeconomic development of SIDS in general and of STP in particular.

#### Note

[1]. His most recent book is *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

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**Citation:** Gerhard Seibert. Review of das Neves de Sousa, Maria. *São Tomé e Príncipe como um Gateway Regional: Estratégia para um desenvolvimento sustentável*. H-Luso-Africa, H-Net Reviews. March, 2021.

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